

Book Reviews

Audi, Robert. *Moral Perception*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

In *Moral Perception*, Robert Audi maintains that we have three sources of moral intuitions which yield moral knowledge: moral perception, reflection (either on concrete cases or on general principles), and some kinds of emotion. In his first chapter he sketches an account of *non-moral* perception (of physical things) as involving a representational experience with specific phenomenal qualities. The phenomenal element in perception depends causally on the perceived object and varies systematically with changes in it.

Chapter 2 contains Audi's account of moral perception. We perceive a moral property of an action or of a person in virtue of our perception of the non-normative properties on which the moral property is constitutively based and our "felt sense of connection" (p. 39) between the two kinds of property. For example, I perceive a man furtively removing a bracelet from a woman's handbag as wrong because I perceive the non-normative properties of the action and I have a felt sense of connection between those properties and wrongness. The representation of the moral property is not part of the *sensory* phenomenal content of the perception, but it is integrated with that content to form part of the total phenomenal content of the perception. The perceiver does not *infer* the moral property from the non-normative base properties with the aid of the felt sense of connection, but rather, *sees* the moral property in virtue of the felt sense of connection.

In Chapter 3, Audi claims that the relation between the moral properties and their base properties is necessary and *a priori*. Therefore, non-inferential moral beliefs which are formed in direct response to moral perceptions may be justified. Moral perception therefore provides inter-subjectively accessible grounds for a wide range of moral judgements, thereby making a major kind of ethical objectivity possible.

The topic of moral disagreement is taken up at the end of Chapter 3 and pursued through the first part of Chapter 4. Audi contends that rational moral disagreement is possible because people may differ with regard to

- moral sensitivity;
- standards for sound inference;
- having made a mistake in inference;
- knowledge of relevant facts;
- background theories;

- how various relevant moral considerations should be traded off against each other; and
- epistemic parity, where epistemic peers are equally rational and thoughtful and have considered the same relevant evidence equally conscientiously.

He says that “the common kinds of disagreements in ethics . . . are not between people who are epistemic peers” (p. 82). Disagreement between epistemic peers is possible, he somewhat reluctantly concedes (p. 77), but it is very difficult to know whether another person is an epistemic peer. By re-checking our own grounds for a belief we may increase our justification for it: “Insofar as we are self-critical and have justified self-trust, as some of us do, our retention of a belief after such scrutiny tends to be confirmatory” (p. 80). In the last two-thirds of Chapter 4 Audi is concerned with moral intuitions which, he claims, are direct responses to something a person non-perceptually sees, not inferences from prior premises, even though they may result from wide-ranging reflective consideration rather than being obvious.

Chapter 5 compares ethics and aesthetics. Aesthetic properties, like moral ones, depend on non-normative properties, and aesthetic perception and aesthetic intuition parallel their moral counterparts, although aesthetic intuitions seem to require more experience and education than do moral ones. An intuition that an action is overall obligatory, or wrong on balance, is a response to a complex pattern of factors, as is an aesthetic judgement. The complexity of the pattern is usually much greater in aesthetic than in moral cases, but in both types of case the intuition results from reflective consideration, not from inference.

Audi turns to emotions in Chapter 6. He says that while emotions do not have a content that may be true or false, most have cognitive, motivational, and affective constituents and typically embody beliefs (sometimes intuitive ones). Emotion is often a response (appropriate or inappropriate) to a pattern. It may enable us to see more and it may respond to the whole as more than the sum of the parts, so that it may be part of the basis for a moral intuition.

Chapter 7 gives illustrations of the kinds of emotions that are appropriate to, and that may provide evidence for, the violation of, or the fulfillment of, the obligations involved in W. D. Ross’s “eight principles of prima facie obligation” (p. 146). Audi discusses how emotions may play a similar role in thought experiments and other exercises of moral imagination, and he makes some comments on moral judgment.¹

¹ I note here some general points, leaving substantive issues for the body of the review. The book is generally clear, but there are some obscure sentences or longer passages that I could not construe despite several re-readings (pp. 37-38, p. 57 n. 7, p. 63, p. 91). There is a good deal of repetition between and within chapters. The book is written in a scholastic style; there are ponderous digressions (pp. 17-20, 71-74, 85-88, 134-36, 160-61, 162-64), occupied with drawing more distinctions than seem necessary for the job

The primary concern of Audi's book is moral perception and the possibility of non-inferential and objective moral knowledge connected with it. That will be the focus of my discussion. The claim that there are moral perceptions should not surprise anyone who is already aware, either from the philosophy of science or from the empirical psychology of perception, that observations are theory-laden. What we (seem to) see depends not only on what we are looking at and on our sense organs, but also on our background theories. For example, what a layperson sees as an oscillating iron bar with a mirror attached, sending a beam of light to a celluloid ruler, a physicist sees as the electrical resistance of a coil.² In the case of the physicist, the background theories are articulated theories which are learned and may, of course, be mistaken. If the relevant body of physical theory were falsified and replaced with something better, the physicist in learning the new theories, may simultaneously acquire a new way of seeing old events. However, the theories which help determine the content of our perceptions need not be articulated and they need not be learned. Young children, and also tribal people, see inanimate things, particularly those which move—such as rivers, leaves, the sun, the moon, clouds, a thrown stone—as living beings with wills subject to moral laws or moral authority. The background theory here is neither learned nor initially articulated, though it becomes increasingly, though unsystematically, articulated as the child grows. Children in modern societies, as opposed to tribal ones, presumably under the influence of their parents and the larger culture, replace their unlearned and largely unarticulated animistic theories with learned and more-or-less articulated mechanical ones on average a little after their tenth year.³

It seems clear that the felt sense of connection between moral and non-normative properties, of which Audi speaks as generating the moral aspects of our moral perceptions, is an incompletely articulated and unsystematic background moral theory. It also seems clear that such theories are not purely an outcome of biology (as the child's animistic theories seem to be), but are largely products of the influence of the culture in which a person lives. That seems clear because people raised in different cultures have different moral perceptions of the same events. For example, suppose that a woman uses a knife to remove the clitoris and inner labia of a five-year-old girl, without anaesthetic, in the absence of any medical reason to do so. A

at hand, unless Audi's job at hand is simply to draw distinctions rather than to solve theoretical problems.

² Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, 2nd ed., trans. P. P. Wiener (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 145.

³ Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1929), chaps. 5-7. For other examples of how background theories influence what we perceive, see James Kalat, *Introduction to Psychology*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2011), pp. 123-40.

person (male or female) from a culture in which this is a norm may see the woman's action as morally good and right, either simply because of a felt sense of connection between such action and those moral properties, or because of a slightly more elaborate background theory which links such treatment of females with what is good for them or good for society.⁴ In contrast, most people reared in a contemporary Western culture would see the woman's action as morally wrong, and may feel the moral emotions of indignation or disgust toward the woman and sympathy toward the child, because the background theory is that inflicting such a gross injury on an innocent is wrong.

So we have:

- (i) The moral aspects of a moral perception are not part of the sensory content of the perception, but are contributed by the perceiver's background moral theory.
- (ii) The background moral theories of different perceivers often contradict each other and, when that is so, at most one of them can be true.

The conjunction of (i) and (ii) seems to undermine Audi's claims that moral perception may ground moral knowledge and that it provides inter-subjectively accessible grounds which make ethical objectivity possible. Audi seeks to extricate himself from this dilemma by discounting moral perceptions he finds troublesome, as due to background moral theories which reflect bias or moral or epistemic failings (pp. 74-83). Unfortunately, that maneuver tends to convert rational disputes into *ad hominem* ones, as I will illustrate with one of Audi's examples.

A priest and a pimp, Audi says, will see very different things when they observe a desperate woman turn to prostitution:

The priest sees [the] woman . . . as demeaned and treated merely as a means. The pimp . . . may see her amorally, as needing to make the best living she can The pimp may . . . have certain moral concepts and a good sense of the base properties for them, but may also be *amoral* in . . . [having] no moral commitments regarding the woman or anyone else and no motivation to act on any moral propositions he may happen to believe. . . . [Or] he may lack the morally important notions of violation of a person and of treating a person merely as a means . . . [or] he might not apply them by all the same criteria as the priest, or may simply be insensitive to the evidences that indicate their application . . . [which] is in part a matter of moral education. (pp. 74-75)

⁴ Her Majesty's Government, *Female Genital Mutilation* (London: The Stationery Office, 2011), pp. 6-7.

Audi presumably regards a priest as a paragon of virtue, despite all of the child-abuse scandals, and a pimp as a paradigm of vice: the disputants are chosen so that one can be dismissed as lacking the credentials for a moral discussion. However, I am not a pimp, but I think that the pimp is at least partly right and that the priest is wrong. So Audi must say that I amorally ignore my moral obligations, lack the relevant moral concepts, misapply them, or am morally insensitive and morally uneducated. If I allow myself to be provoked by such insults, I might respond in kind and say that Audi and the priest exhibit the immaturity of holding that the moral dogmas drummed into them as children are unquestionably true. But, of course, I have better manners. Ironically, one of Audi's aims is to show how "cross-cultural communication in ethics" is possible (p. 4). I suppose that mutual abuse and recrimination do count as communication, though of an unedifying sort. Rather than grounding moral knowledge and ethical objectivity, Audi's moral epistemology encourages holy war between closed-minded sects, all proclaiming their own "justified self-trust."

That there is such a thing as moral perception seems irrelevant to moral epistemology, the central problem of which is how we can evaluate, objectively, rival moral theories, including the background moral theories on which moral perception depends. It would be question-begging to appeal to moral perceptions to try to solve that problem because of (i) and (ii) above. One lesson we can learn from the failure of Audi's approach is that, rather than trying to locate the sources of the theories of our intellectual adversaries in their personal defects, we should focus on the rival theories themselves and find ways to criticize and test them.⁵ To some extent this can be done *a priori*, by pointing out inconsistency, explanatory inadequacy, unnecessary complexity, disanalogy, or *ad hocness*. However, some of the argument will usually be empirical, appealing to consequences. Let us return to Audi's example.

On the priest's view, it is inherent to prostitution that the woman is demeaned, violated, and treated merely as a means. But why should that be so? It is not inherently demeaning to sell services for money; Audi and the priest both do it. It is not inherently demeaning to engage in casual sex: for both sexes, such encounters can be physically and emotionally gratifying,⁶ and casual sex need not result in lower self-esteem or impaired well-being.⁷ If

⁵ Karl Popper, "On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance," in Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 3-30.

⁶ Justin Garcia and Chris Reiber, "Hook-Up Behavior: A Biopsychosocial Perspective," *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology* 2, no. 4 (2008), pp. 192-208.

⁷ Marla Eisenberg, Diann Ackard, Michael Resnick, and Dianne Neumark-Sztaine, "Casual Sex and Psychological Health Among Young Adults: Is Having 'Friends with

neither selling services nor casual sex is inherently demeaning, how could it be inherently demeaning to combine the two? In fact, many women have made a good living from prostitution, either for a short period of time or as a life's work, and many enjoy the work and derive increased self-esteem from it.⁸ Furthermore, it is not inherent to prostitution that the woman is violated in any objectionable sense: she *consents* to the sex. Similarly, a patient who consents to surgery is not violated in any objectionable sense. The prostitute is not treated *merely* as a means either. She is paid for her services and she consents to sell them because doing so helps her to achieve her *ends*. Her client no more treats her merely as a means than Audi treats a plumber merely as a means when he pays her to straighten out his drooping ballcock. Of course, some women are coerced into prostitution by people-traffickers and other thugs, but some people are coerced into various forms of manual labor (in North Korea, for example) without that impugning the legitimacy of manual labor as an occupation. It is therefore difficult to see how prostitution could be inherently wrong. I do not claim that these considerations are decisive. My point is that we can argue rationally over the propositions at issue, that such discussion can reveal the weaknesses of our culturally inherited background theories, which we can then discard, and that internecine disputes over each other's credentials are a pernicious distraction from rational criticism of theories.⁹

Danny Frederick
Independent Scholar

Benefits' Emotionally Damaging?" *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 41, no. 4 (2009), pp. 231-37.

⁸ Ronald Weitzer, "New Directions in Research on Prostitution," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 43, nos. 4-5 (2005), pp. 213-18.

⁹ This review has benefitted from critical comments made by Mark D. Friedman on an earlier draft.

